moving on – from spatial planning to localism and beyond

As the Localism Bill makes its way through Parliament, it seems that planners and communities still have little idea of the implications and how to react, say Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger – who argue that in order to understand localism we must first acknowledge and move on from planning’s recent past

Most analyses of the Localism Bill have naturally compared likely futures with the immediate past and come to rather gloomy conclusions. While perhaps inevitable, such comparisons are selective and harmful. Comparing localism to the immediate past is a bit like trying to drive by using only the rear-view mirror. However, there is also a level of mythology at work that is elevating the past to some sort of halcyon era. If planning and planners are to understand and be part of change – be it to localism or any other system – there is a need for an honest appraisal of why such change has come about. In the current situation, the origin of change can be found in two words: spatial planning.

Spatial planning became the dominant planning doctrine during the New Labour years. Presented as a progressive, proactive approach and contrasted with the more reactive land use planning, the spatial oeuvre promised inclusive processes and ‘win-win-win’ outcomes around sustainable development, economic growth and social justice. In England, spatial planning was strongly linked with the 2004 reforms to development planning, including the re-introduction of a regional tier of planning and the re-orientation and expansion of national planning policy. Through multi-scalar and sectoral co-ordination and integration, ‘spatial planning’ was envisaged by some as a form of meta-spatial governance or, in more prosaic terms, concerned with ‘place-making’.

Hubris, that sense of hauteur related to losing touch with reality and the overestimation of abilities, was never far from the fore. While spatial planning echoed many of the concerns of New Labour, it was conceived, packaged and sold as a solution to government concerns around planning and the ability of planners to deliver and modernise. The hubris was that spatial planning could square the circle, delivering consensus-based, high-quality, place-sensitive sustainable development. That few initially questioned this promise – ourselves included – could be interpreted charitably as collective self-delusion, ‘groupthink’, or ‘communal reinforcement’. Whatever the interpretation, a dominant belief formed around spatial planning that positioned its holders as the defenders of what was ‘right’ – a position that eschews alternative understanding and derides attempts to critically engage with it.

Nemesis is rarely far away from such hubristic ambition. In retrospect, spatial planning was replete with overambitious statements and was not subject to sufficient critical engagement or challenge. This is, perhaps, not surprising, as a powerful
professional and academic coalition vested much hope in the success of the spatial planning project, and such faith was repaid to some acolytes with both positional power and professional kudos for adherence to what was presented as the successful re-invention of planning.

Yet one could almost forgive the lack of delivery and failure to live up to (high) expectations if it were not for the damage done to planning as a result. Of particular concern is the alienation of communities and other stakeholders, as planning and planners moved from attempting to act as arbiters of competing views to partnering and facilitating development. Trust and legitimacy in planning have taken a severe blow.

It is against this background that the growing political and academic critique of spatial planning needs to be viewed. And it is upon these foundations that the proposals for planning emerging through Parliament derive their justification: if spatial planning was the ‘Big State’, then the reaction to its failure, however flawed, is the Prime Minister’s ‘Big Society’, or small State. The legacy of spatial planning will be felt for some considerable time.

Rather than a mea culpa or even a hint of modesty, the Royal Town Planning Institute’s 2010 Manifesto for Planning sets out to maintain the faith for those who believe in planning and its spatial planning variant, opening with the following statement (on p.3): ‘Now, more than ever before, it is the planning system that guides how and where we live, work and relax.’ It is not difficult to envisage how non-planners might see this as rather neglecting their contribution, whether as private individuals or businesses or other parts of the State apparatus. The core values and role of planning are not the problem here – it is the overstatement, the sense of hubris indeed.

Such imperious views of planning cannot be wholly blamed upon practising planners: the academic community is also incriminated. Driven by a shared, high moral purpose for planning and constructed from an exegesis of Habermas, Rawls and other luminaries, academics provided a range of compliant and complementary theories for spatial planning.

To paraphrase the RTPI, there is now, more than ever before, a need to understand how planning has reached the nadir of crude localism and to re-introduce a critical perspective on this state of affairs.

**Spatial planning under pressure**

The starting point in any understanding is the need for honest reflection. Spatial planning was less of a high concept, more a form of low politics. Indeed, one of the most helpful ways of understanding spatial planning is to think of it as a political resource, a tactic even – something which various forces could struggle over the meaning of as they sought to use it to justify particular political projects. Seen in this light, spatial planning at heart was a tactic of the planning profession to align itself with some of the key ideas of New Labour – consensus-building as a form of ‘big tent’ politics, the preference for win-win-win solutions, and the emphasis on improved policy co-ordination.

In its early days in office (1997-2002), New Labour showed considerable signs of dissatisfaction with planning, much like preceding Conservative governments had – not least its supposedly slow pace and inability to create the kinds of outcomes sought by government. This dissatisfaction and reforming zeal did not disappear with the emergence of spatial planning as a key planning discourse from 2002 to 2004. Concerns soon emerged about the mechanisms used to roll out spatial planning and the appropriateness of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks; how spatial planning was predicated upon a consensus around growth; the prioritisation of environmental concerns over economic matters; the lack of attention paid to co-ordination with other sectors, particularly health and education; and the time taken and cost of securing permission for developments seemingly agreed through the post-2004 development plan system.

One upshot was various attempts to ‘retrofit’ such concerns and issues. The ability of planning to absorb change and appear ‘reformed’ while actually changing little was a major concern of Labour, particularly after 2007/08 and the impact of the credit crunch and recession upon development and economic activity. A series of subsequent ad hoc changes around major infrastructure delivery, the rebranding of development control to ‘development management’, and plan preparation in order to speed up preparation derived, in part, from frustration at the limited and sometimes unintended impacts of earlier ‘modernisation’ attempts.

A more honest appraisal would highlight that spatial planning was not so much a lost ‘golden era’ of visionary strategic thinking, more a successful short-term PR fix for the planning profession.

‘There is now, more than ever before, a need to understand how planning has reached the nadir of crude localism and to re-introduce a critical perspective on this state of affairs’
Nemesis – the fall of spatial planning

Given the above it is hardly surprising that today spatial planning appears to have gone missing, with only occasional sightings – at least in its English variant. In other countries the term spatial planning has been less overtly politicised and may yet have some meaning and relevance. But in England, the term has all but disappeared from official view. It is not mentioned in the Conservative Party Green Paper on planning, in the Localism Bill, nor in the official guide to the Localism Bill. One searches hard to find a single mention of ‘spatial planning’ in Government documents post-May 2010 – the word used is always ‘planning’. Spatial planning appears to have become a politically contaminated brand, airbrushed from history.

At both philosophical and pragmatic levels the move away from the spatial planning oeuvre is evident too, although not so striking. Elements of the Coalition’s agenda, such as the proposal to abolish Regional Strategies and Local Area Agreements would, at the very least, hint at a move away from some of the concerns of spatial planning. Yet separating spatial planning as a political project from spatial planning as a mindset and professional doctrine is not straightforward. Spatial planning as a doctrine of planning practice was always going to be a loose fit with the priorities and policies of any government concerned with winning elections and promoting a wide set of (sometimes contradictory) agendas.

It may be unfair and inaccurate to throw the baby of spatial planning out with the New Labour bathwater, but that might well be what is happening. It may be the price that has to be paid for a profession that aligned itself too closely with the party political agendas of the day.

Dealing with grief

There are various stages of grief that those closely associated with a loved one must come to terms with following their passing. The first stage is shock and denial. And there are many who still refuse to accept the loss of spatial planning. It is even now celebrated by some professional lobby groups and professional bodies, who cling to the belief that spatial planning is still with us or at least that it can be re-incarnated.

The second stage involves pain and guilt, including remorse over what might have been; things we might have said or done to help but didn’t. The third stage involves anger and bargaining, blaming innocent others for what is happening, and asking: ‘Why us; what did we do wrong? Was it a professional or political set of failures, or both – what can we do to address them? If we can identify the failings, maybe we can reform spatial planning and get it back – there will be a form of redemptive re-incarnation in which some of the best features of spatial planning are restored.

The final stages of grief come when we move towards acceptance and hope. We need to learn to move on from spatial planning, acknowledging the ‘highs’ and the ‘lows’, learning from them both. Most importantly, there is an urgent need to find a new sense of purpose and hope for planning; one that gives planners back the trust of communities and their other would-be partners, one that involves less overweening self-confidence, more humility and greater recognition of professional limits.

‘There is an urgent need to find a new sense of purpose and hope for planning; one that gives planners back the trust of communities and their other would-be partners, one that involves less overweening self-confidence, more humility and greater recognition of professional limits’

Localism – hubris and nemesis redux

The Localism Bill published in December 2010 points towards a new era for planning, characterised by a reduced central State presence, the shift from ‘top-down’ targets on housing, a suite of deregulatory proposals, and a new sub-local, neighbourhood emphasis upon plan-making and development. And all this in an era of public sector austerity, in which planners in local authorities and elsewhere fear for their jobs.

There is nothing specifically contrary to the spirit and purpose of spatial planning in the Coalition’s proposals. Indeed, some of the themes and tenets of spatial planning – namely the emphasis upon collaborative processes and co-ordination across and between scales and sectors – appear to be elements of the Government’s proposals.

And as a professional discourse and worldview, spatial planning is more difficult to dismiss, particularly given the discretion at the heart of UK planning and the current emphasis upon localism. If localism means anything, then it ought to allow for a range of approaches, where varieties of spatial planning might exist alongside more traditional regulatory models of planning. This move away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach could offer new opportunities for planning and planners for re-invention, including taking the best elements of planning practice over the past decade and adapting them to an austere development climate.
One of the key critiques from the Coalition Government of planning’s recent past concerns its democratic deficit, leading to the decisions to abolish Regional Strategies and their accompanying technical apparatus, and to bring the Infrastructure Planning Commission into government. There are all manner of problematic practical issues around these decisions and the move towards Local Economic Partnerships and neighbourhood planning. They appear to be a re-invention of new modes of engaging planning with democratic systems, each with their own problems.

For instance, the decision to allow Neighbourhood Plans to go forward on a simple 50% approval in a local referendum is a form of majoritarian issue-based planning that will create a new set of inequities and perverse behaviours over time. For example, it is difficult to see many Neighbourhood Plans produced under this system agreeing to accommodate essential but problematic locally unwanted land uses – not least sites for travellers. Localism will surely undergo its own form of hubris and nemesis, where it will collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. If spatial planning was essentially a fast-forward story of professional hubris and nemesis, then as things stand localism may be an equally fast-forward tale of political hubris and nemesis.

There are two potential problems for planners here. The first is in engaging with the debate on localism as if the only alternative is a return to spatial planning, and, perhaps more significantly, the loss of credibility within government given the failed promises of a decade or so ago. The second is in the planning profession taking localism to heart too quickly, on the rebound from its affair with spatial planning. It takes times to recover from grand passions of the heart when they turn sour and to learn more about ourselves.

To conclude, we want to try to open a more reflective debate on the links between democratic practices and the nature of politics in planning, since one thing that is clear is that the new Government has been far more critical of the democratic deficits of the new modes of planning emerging under New Labour than were many in the planning profession itself. This is mildly embarrassing, to say the least.

One way in to this debate might be through beginning to re-acknowledge and accommodate planning as a highly political and contested process. Consensus, collaboration, partnership etc. are fine ideals and aspirations, but difficulties arise when they are used to exclude difference, managing out moments of fundamental disagreement, and in the process undermining politics proper. One outcome of this has been the growing recourse to judicial review by those who can afford it. This problematic management and exclusion of difference – the details of development rather than the principle – has fuelled the loss of legitimacy for planning in recent years.

Seen from this perspective, the challenges facing planning are profound. It needs to rethink its links to the democratic process, and to examine much more critically its role in obscuring properly political moments of dissent – where taken-for-granted assumptions are disrupted and new ways of thinking are called for. Rather than ‘managing’ dissent carefully in ways that help to build consensus between willing partners, planning needs to consider a more disruptive role for itself.

‘This problematic management and exclusion of difference – the details of development rather than the principle – has fuelled the loss of legitimacy for planning in recent years’ and others in challenging existing assumptions, responding to alternative forms of knowledge, and finding alternative ways of engaging in public discourse.

In short, the challenge for planning is not simply getting over spatial planning – it is about rethinking its role in ways that acknowledge and engage with different models of democratic politics, where democratic politics is not simply ‘out there’ as something that legitimates planning actions but is something altogether more complex and varied.

● Phil Allmendinger is Professor of Land Economy in the Department of Land Economy at the University of Cambridge, and Graham Haughton is Professor of Urban and Environmental Planning in the School of Environment and Development at the University of Manchester. The views expressed here are personal.

Notes